



**UNCSD Rio+20**  
**United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development**  
**Rio de Janeiro, 4-6<sup>th</sup> June 2012**

**Seas At Risk**  
**Contribution to the Rio+20 Zero Draft**

Seas At Risk is a Brussels-based independent association of European environmental organisations working to protect the marine environment and restore it to health. It is concerned with the full range of marine environmental issues, but at present its resources are focussed on the promotion of climate-friendly low impact fisheries, reducing the climate impact of the shipping industry, marine litter, offshore oil & gas drilling, and a number of more general marine-related EU policy processes. Seas At Risk progresses its objectives by representing its members at international political and regulatory meetings of government and by raising awareness amongst decision makers of the importance of marine issues. In this role Seas At Risk is active in a number of international bodies including the UNFCCC, the International Maritime Organisation, the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, and the major EU institutions. It hopes to participate in Rio+20.

As an organisation with a focus on marine and oceans issues our contribution here will be restricted to these areas, although we see the perilous state of the oceans, and the failings in oceans governance as symptomatic and illustrative of the wider environmental and developmental problems that must be addressed at Rio+20.

**Stopping the Collapse of Oceanic Systems**  
**A theme for Rio+20**

In the past, including at precious UNCSDs, oceans conservation has tended to play second fiddle to terrestrial environmental concerns. The threats posed to the oceans have always been serious, but other issues were perhaps seen as more pressing. This we believe is now changing, and Seas At Risk agrees with UNEP's identification of the "potential collapse of oceanic systems" as a key emerging issue for Rio+20. The "perfect storm" of overfishing, habitat destruction, pollution and ocean acidification should on its own place oceans issues at the very top of the Rio+20 agenda, but add to this the significance of the green economy and governance issues to solving these problems and you have a substantial argument for making oceans a key overarching theme of the Rio+20 conference.

Under this theme, Seas At Risk believes the following issues should be addressed at Rio+20.



## **Overfishing & oceans governance**

The protein derived from fish, crustaceans and molluscs accounts for around 15% of the animal protein intake of the human population. Seafood is an essential major world-wide protein source, yet around 50% of fish stocks are fully depleted and another 25% are either overexploited or depleted. The further collapse of key fish stocks would have devastating effects not just on the environment but on the nutrition, development and economics of many countries around the world, including some of the most vulnerable.

More generally, the biodiversity and productivity of the world's oceans are diminishing at an increasing and alarming rate. Globally some 90% of large fish species, like sharks, tuna and swordfish, have disappeared in the last few decades. Once abundant species such as Atlantic cod and the common skate are now considered globally threatened. Many marine habitats, ranging from the species-rich rocky reefs of Europe and coral reefs of the tropics, to the fragile creatures and ecosystems found in the deep sea, have already been fundamentally altered by destructive fishing techniques and other anthropogenic activities. And international commitments to-date have resulted in only around 1.5% of the world's oceans being nominally protected as "Marine Protected Areas" and less than 0.5% having full protection as "Marine Reserves". Many observers believe that only by fully protecting a third of our oceans will marine biodiversity and fish stocks have a chance of recovery.

The deep seas are a particular concern. Recognised as regions of extreme vulnerability to human impacts, the deep seas are subject to numerous harmful practices which threaten long-term sustainability. High seas bottom trawling in particular not only directly removes vulnerable long-lived species from the deep sea, but also damages sensitive habitats such as deep sea coral.

Without a healthy marine environment there cannot be healthy fish stocks and without healthy fish stocks the fisheries and the communities they support have no future.

In respect of overfishing and oceans governance Seas At Risk would like to see a Rio+20 agreement that includes:

1. A global plan of action to ensure that all fisheries are exploited sustainably, and in compliance with and not exceeding scientific advice.
2. An agreement to upgrade oceans governance and start a negotiating process towards a new implementing agreement under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea for the protection and conservation of high seas biodiversity and the management of human activity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. This to include provisions on monitoring, the use of environmental assessment, and implementation of the precautionary principle and ecosystem-based approach in decision-making.
3. A global mechanism for the establishment of an extensive and representative system of Marine Protected Areas in the high seas including no-take zones. A target of full protection for at least 30% of the world's seas and oceans should be set.



## **Pollution and marine litter**

Seas At Risk and its members are concerned about all forms of marine pollution but believe that marine litter and plastic marine litter in particular poses a huge, growing and previously underestimated problem.

Marine debris is a widespread pollution problem with plastics making up approximately three-quarters of all litter floating in the ocean. During the 25th International Coastal Clean-up in 2010 some 615,407 volunteers from 114 countries picked up nearly 4,000 tonnes of litter. Over three quarters of this debris was plastic. Scientists estimate there to be 250 billion pieces floating in the Mediterranean Sea alone. Almost all North Sea fulmars, a bird that exclusively feeds in the marine environment, are found with plastics in their stomachs. Beaches in the North East Atlantic have on average 712 pieces of plastic per 100m, and plastic bags make up around 10% of all marine litter. Huge floating oceanic "garbage patches" have been found in both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

The marine environment has become engulfed in plastics and they are of special environmental concern as they may never completely disappear from the environment, and could persist for many hundreds if not thousands of years. Larger items will eventually break down into small plastic particles and microscopic dust, which can be consumed by filter-feeding animals such as barnacles. Toxic pollutants can be attracted onto the surface of plastic pieces so may pose a previously unrecognised threat to marine animals once ingested. Ultimately these pollutants may then be passed up the food chain to fish and to human consumers. Items of fishing litter which are also composed of plastic are also of particular concern as these are the items most likely to entangle wildlife. Marine litter affects multiple areas of the marine environment across the globe and the underlying causes are multi-dimensional, multi-sectoral and multi-geographical.

Although the problem has recently received some much needed publicity, action to solve it has been slow and so far ineffective. Both of the central themes of the Rio+20 conference – governance and the green economy - have very clear links to tackling this serious problem.

In respect of marine litter Seas At Risk would like to see a Rio+20 agreement that includes:

1. An international Action Plan and targets for tackling the rising tide of marine litter. This is necessary in itself and to compliment and encourage more bottom-up, national and regional strategies. Marine litter is an excellent example of the kind of pressing global marine issue that would benefit from enhanced international governance and stronger implementation, compliance and enforcement mechanisms. The United Nations Environment Programme upgraded to the status of a UN "specialised agency" could perform this role.
2. An international commitment to use green economic instruments to favour and incentivise the use of long life, fully biodegradable and sustainably sourced goods and packaging. Such an initiative would fit well with the green economy agenda, and would protect our oceans from the flood of disposable and single use goods that are ending up in the marine environment. It would also benefit the terrestrial environment, and have far reaching positive resource, economic and social impacts.



## **Ocean acidification & climate change**

Ocean acidification, caused when CO<sub>2</sub> dissolves in seawater, has been called the “evil twin” of climate change and while much less well known or understood, its implications for the marine environment are equally if not more profound and long-lasting.

Corals are in the frontline of rising marine pH levels but the impact will reach far beyond the reefs to associated marine life and the social and economic activities that depend on them. Impacts on shell forming organisms are also already being felt and this holds the potential to undermine whole marine ecosystems. If key elements in a food web are removed as a result of the inability of organisms to build shells then the food web itself can collapse with unimaginable consequences for the world’s oceans and those that depend on them for their livelihood.

The only way to tackle ocean acidification is to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. All sectors have to play a part in this, but Seas At Risk believes that a special responsibility lies with the marine industries whose future is so intertwined with a healthy marine environment.

In respect of ocean acidification and climate change Seas At Risk would like to see a Rio+20 agreement that includes:

1. A coordinated international push to raise awareness and understanding about the threat of ocean acidification.
2. As part of the push for a green economy, an international agreement to eliminate harmful subsidies that have the effect of keeping marine fuel prices lower than they would otherwise be. At present these work against fuel efficiencies of the shipping sector and allow harmful and fuel-intensive fishing practices that would otherwise be uneconomic.
3. An international commitment to a package of measures to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the shipping sector including market-based measures, incentives for renewable technical developments, and speed limits. The latter is especially important as emissions are predicted to double or triple by 2050 and speed limits are the only option available that can result in fast deep cuts in emissions.
4. A commitment to cease the search for new marine oil & gas reserves, accepting that the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that will result are unsustainable and that drilling in deep and otherwise hazardous environments will always pose unacceptable Deep Water Horizon-style risks to the marine environment.

Seas At Risk

[www.seas-at-risk.org](http://www.seas-at-risk.org)

1<sup>st</sup> November 2011